

MODERN ALCHEMISTS

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IN THE 20TH CENTURY, an assortment of Jungian analysts, New Age healers, and students of the occult attempted to revive the alchemist's art of achieving spiritual perfection. But are there any old-fashioned chemical alchemists left, slaving over vials of mercury and sulfur, distilling and dissolving in pursuit of gold and immortality?



ELIXIR OF LIFE?

Traditional alchemy is not unknown to the New World. According to Mark Stavish's "History of Alchemy in North America," Colonial Connecticut governor John Winthrop Jr. may have maintained his own lab. In 1773, the Massachusetts judge Samuel Danforth offered Ben Franklin a sample of the philosopher's stone, the substance said to turn base materials into gold—only to be ridiculed. By 1777, Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale, was taking pains to explain that his dabblings in alchemy were "imaginary, conjectural, and speculative."

In the meantime, experiments in medical alchemy were underway at the Pennsylvania utopian commune of Ephrata; if patients survived the 40-day regimen of fasting, bleeding, and toxic elixirs, they were promised a 5,557-year lease on life. In 1917, the California couple Robert and Isabella Ingalese claimed to have resurrected a doctor's wife by placing a dose of white philosopher's stone on her tongue; while the story of their immortality survived them, the couple died in 1934.

With the discovery of radioactive decay in 1896, the transmutation of one element into another was shown to be a fact of nature. But no new alchemy was born. An exception was Jean Dubuis, a French engineer and physicist who, in addition to designing "mind machines" that give the user spiritual experiences, founded the Philosophers of Nature in 1979. The group still offers a seven-year course in "mineral alchemy," where students can learn basic techniques like deliquescing the butter of antimony and distilling animated mercury.